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Pakistan simply sees no reason to stop supporting terrorists

By Ashley J. Tellis
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As the search for stability in Afghanistan intensifies, the threat of violence and a wider conflagration in the region is growing. In an effort to secure a dominant position in Afghanistan and to blunt India's rise, Pakistan has mobilized militants and terrorists on both sides of its borders.

While the Afghan Taliban fighting the military forces of the United States and, more generally, those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization continue to enjoy Pakistani support, Islamabad has exchanged its previous policy of supporting anti-Indian insurgencies with that of supporting terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, the organization that mounted the deadly assault against the Indian city of Mumbai in November 2008. With tension persisting between the two South Asian rivals, such a tactic not only increases the prospect of major war between New Delhi and Islamabad, but, given Lashkar-e-Taiba's growing reach, it could well have global consequences.

The disruption of the India-Pakistan peace process, which has remained frozen since the time of the Mumbai attack, is due principally to Pakistan's unwillingness to bring to justice the Lashkar-e-Taiba leadership, which has enjoyed the support of the country's powerful intelligence organization, Inter-Services Intelligence. After almost two decades of punting, many Pakistanis today – academics, policy analysts, and even government officials – concede that the fomenting of insurgencies inside Indian territory has been a main component of Pakistan's national strategy. However, this late admission only comes long after Pakistan's military establishment has moved to replace its failed strategy of

encouraging anti-Indian insurgencies with the more lethal approach of unleashing terrorist groups against its neighbor.

Since its formation in 1947, Pakistan has sought to stir up insurgencies inside India. The earliest efforts in 1947 and 1948 centered on provoking insurrections in Jammu and Kashmir in the hope that an internal rebellion would permit Pakistan's seizure of this disputed state.

These efforts failed miserably. Through three major conflicts between Pakistan and India, the people of Kashmir remained loyal to New Delhi. After Pakistan's defeat in the war of 1971, Islamabad attempted to stoke other secessionist movements, this time not to make any territorial gains but merely to avenge its military humiliation. But this effort, too, was beaten back by the Indian state. Finally, in 1989, when the first genuinely Kashmiri uprising against New Delhi broke out, Islamabad quickly threw its support behind the insurgents who were led by the secular Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. The revolt, however, was overpowered by the Indian Army by 1993 – and this defeat brought about the momentous change in Islamabad's strategy against India.

Flushed with confidence flowing from the success of the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union during the 1980s, Pakistan sought to replicate in the east what it had managed to do in the west, namely bring about the defeat of a great power larger than itself.

Using the same instruments as before – radical Islamist groups that had sprung up throughout Pakistan – Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence pushed into Jammu and Kashmir for the first time in 1993 by backing combat-hardened individuals alien to the area who were tasked with inflicting large-scale murder and mayhem.

Throughout this period, Pakistan's traditional strategy of fomenting insurgencies against India gave way to a new approach, namely, fomenting terrorism (an instrument that most Pakistanis still refuse to acknowledge). No longer would Pakistan rely on dissatisfied indigenous populations to advance Islamabad's interests; instead, vicious bands of Islamic terrorists, most of whom had little or no connection to any existing grievances with India, would be unleashed indiscriminately to kill large numbers of civilians.

From 1996 on, these attacks were deliberately extended at the behest of Inter-Services Intelligence throughout India. Of all the myriad terrorist organizations involved, none enjoyed greater state support than Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has since then sprung to international attention because of the bloodbath in Mumbai. However, the group had been active in South Asia since 1987, first in Afghanistan and thereafter in India.

Of all the terrorist groups that Inter-Services Intelligence has sponsored over the years, Lashkar-e-Taiba has been especially favored because its dominant Punjabi composition matches the predominant ethnicity that is found in the Pakistani Army and the Pakistani intelligence services. At the same time, the group's puritanical form of Salafism has undergirded its willingness to engage in risky military operations throughout India. Many

of those inside Inter-Services Intelligence are deeply sympathetic to Lashkar-e-Taiba's vision of recovering "lost Muslim lands" in Asia and Europe, as well as of resurrecting a universal Islamic Caliphate by using the instrument of jihad.

Although Pakistan's propaganda machine often asserts that Lashkar-e-Taiba is a Kashmiri organization that is moved by the Kashmiri cause, it is in fact nothing of the sort. The 3,000-odd foot soldiers who make up its fighting cadre are drawn primarily from the Pakistani Punjab. India's intelligence services today estimate that Lashkar-e-Taiba maintains some kind of presence in 21 countries worldwide with the intention of supporting or participating in what its leader, Hafeez Saeed, has called the perpetual "jihad against the infidels." Consequently, Lashkar-e-Taiba's operations in and around India, which often receive the most attention, are only part of a larger campaign that has taken Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives and soldiers as far afield as Australia, Canada, Chechnya, China, Eritrea, Kosovo, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Spain, the UK, and even the US.

Given the organization's vast presence, its prolific capacity to raise funds worldwide, and its ability to conduct militant activities at great distances from its home base, Lashkar-e-Taiba has become the preferred instrument of Inter-Services Intelligence in Pakistan's ongoing covert war against India. This includes the campaign that Pakistan is currently waging against the Indian presence in Afghanistan, as well as against the counterinsurgency efforts of the United States in the country. Active Lashkar-e-Taiba operations in Pakistan's northwestern border areas also involve close collaboration with Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the so-called Haqqani network, and a group called Jamiat al-Dawa al-Quran wal-Sunna.

Thanks to these activities and others worldwide, Washington has now reached the conclusion that Lashkar-e-Taiba represents a threat to the national interests of the United States. This threat the Americans regard as second only to the one posed by Al-Qaeda. In fact, however, the Lashkar-e-Taiba threat probably exceeds the latter by many measures.

Based on this judgment, US President Barack Obama has told the Pakistani president, Asif Zardari, that targeting Lashkar-e-Taiba would be one of his key conditions for a renewed strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan. Thus far, however, the Pakistani military, which still effectively rules Pakistan even though it does not formally govern the country, has been unresponsive. The military prefers, instead, to emphasize the threat that India supposedly continues to represent for Pakistan – thereby implicitly justifying the continued reliance of Inter-Services Intelligence on terrorism, even as it has demanded further assistance from the United States.

Such a demand is intended to inveigle the US into Pakistan's relentless competition with India. The Pakistani military's dismissal of Obama's injunctions regarding Lashkar-e-Taiba has been driven at least partly by its belief that all warnings coming from the United States are little more than examples of special pleading on behalf of India.

Since assaulting India has become quite a satisfying end in itself for Pakistan, the

Pakistani establishment has shown no incentive whatsoever to interdict Lashkar-e-Taiba. To the degree that Inter-Services Intelligence has attempted to control the terrorist group, it has mainly done so to prevent excessive embarrassment to the group's sponsors in Pakistan, or to avert serious crises that might lead to a war between Pakistan and India. However, when one moves beyond these aims, the Pakistani military has no interest in dismantling any terrorist assets that it believes can serve it well.

Military leaders in Rawalpindi, where the Pakistani military is headquartered, have not only failed to understand that the concerns of the United States about Lashkar-e-Taiba derive fundamentally from Washington's growing conviction that the group's activities worldwide make it a direct threat to the United States; they also continue to harbor the illusion that Pakistan's current strategy of unleashing terrorism will enervate India, will push it to disengage from Afghanistan, and that it will weaken stabilization efforts by the United States in the country. Such a strategy is designed to make Islamabad the kingmaker in Kabul, and in this way determine the future of Afghanistan.

This ambition promises to become just one more in the long line of cruel illusions that has gripped Pakistan since the country's founding.